Personal Information

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Major: AEM; IARD
Name of Host University: IESEG
Period/Time of Exchange: Fall 2010

Practical information

L’administration française. Even the French roll their eyes and shudder at that phrase. The amount of paperwork involved in everything is shocking, and the visa process is one of the most problematic things you’ll run into. It lasts at least 2-3 months, so get on it early! The first thing you have to is register with CampusFrance. You pay a set amount (varies every year) to the organization and enter in some information about why you will be in France. It’s pretty easy but no checks are accepted so you need to get a money order (yes, they still exist!). You need to get your CampusFrance ID number before you are allowed to apply for a visa. The process to get an ID number takes at least 3 weeks. After you receive your ID, you can finally sign up for a time slot at the consulate. Usually, they’re booked full 1-2 months in advance. Now, the process differs for each region. Some consulates require that you show up in person for an “interview” - aka they ask you your name, why you need to go to France and how long you expect to be there. The required documents also differ from consulate to consulate so make sure you check the website! It’s best to bring two copies of everything and more than they ask. Better safe than sorry... At the consulate itself, be SUPER nice to the people working there. They have the power to refuse your visa, expedite the process (which, for the French means it’ll be done on time), or delay your visa. You cannot receive your visa the same day you show up. It will take at least a week, or so they told me. (Hint: It doesn’t take a week. If your appointment is on a Monday, chances are you will be able to pick your visa up on the Friday of that week.) Congratulations! You have your visa. Your visa picture probably is just as cringe-worthy as your passport picture, if not more. But it doesn’t matter, you have that pretty sticker that says you are allowed to go in and out of France whenever you want. Oh wait! You’re still not done. Once you arrive to France, you need to schedule an appointment with OFII (l’Office Francaise de l’Immigration et de l’Intégration). This process will take over a month, cost you 55 euros in the form of a stamp that you can only find at certain Bar/Tabacs (all will sell cigarettes and beer, but only a few of those sell stamps). Once you get your OFII sticker, which is not as pretty as your visa, you are officially a resident of France. You can apply for CAF, where the French government gives you a little bit of money every semester to help out with rent.

My experience with immigration was rather uneventful. As an American citizen, you will rarely have any issues with European Immigration. I got a stamp on my passport and a "Bienvenue en France!" and I was on my way.

Packing

I was a pretty efficient packer. Anything that I needed, I was always able to buy in France. Although I wish I did bring some packets of ramen... That would definitely have saved me on many a Sunday afternoon, when I woke up too late to go to the Sunday morning markets but had no food left in the fridge. Everything is closed on Sundays!

You do NOT need that extra pair of sneakers. You do NOT need that rude sports t-shirt that you love wearing on Saturday afternoons lounging about the house. You will find yourself trying to imitate the French in their style - and what style they have! Buy clothes and shoes in France - you’ll fit in more and less people will think you’re American, because even if immigration doesn’t have an issue with you, by and large many French people still think that Americans are rude, loud and obnoxious.

International office at Host University

I had a very warm reception upon arrival. There was a week-long orientation held by the International Club that introduced the exchange students to Lille and IESEG. A member of the international club picked me up from the train station when I arrived.

We had a "godmother"/"godfather" but pretty much all of the members of the international club were our buddies. They were always willing to help out and they were very enthusiastic and friendly. The first night of orientation, there was a welcome dinner. Throughout the week, there were organized events such as a scavenger hunt, a day trip to Calais and other fun social events at night.

The international office staff was really friendly as well. But if you had immediate questions, the students in the international club were more likely to give you a timely response.
Academics

The University

Classes are focused in three buildings - Bâtiments (Buildings) A, B, E. The administrative offices are scattered throughout Bâtiments A and B. The international office is in Bâtiment D. A and B are next to each other. In fact, they’re attached by a walkway. D is right behind E. They are all located within a block of each other.

Students usually hang out in the lobbies of Bâtiments A and B, the cafeterias in A and the courtyard between the two.

There are four computer labs, two "laptop rooms" and one small library. French students do not usually study in libraries, so the libraries operate on normal working hours - aka 9AM - 12PM, 2PM - 6PM. Wifi is available, as are Ethernet cords. The internet is sometimes spotty, but IESEG is working on it.

Courses

One of the most frustrating issues that I, and a lot of other exchange students, faced is the course enrollment process. Official class lists don't come out until about the week before classes start. Then, you meet with a course administrator or email them and you list what classes you want. You are automatically enrolled. But wait! They do not tell you if the class is full or not, so be prepared: it's possible that you are dropped from a class the week before it happens because too many people signed up, and you must find a replacement. Sometimes, you can sign up for courses and your class is just cancelled or split up and your time slot is moved.

There is a mix of lectures and discussions. Classes are split up into "Intensive" classes, which meet from 8:30 until 12:50/1:10 for one week, with a final on Friday, or "extensive" classes, which meet every week or so throughout the semester. A lot of exchange students take intensive classes. This means that you can strategically set up classes so that you have weeks off to travel and explore.

Homework was sometimes given in intensive classes. Otherwise, most work is done in class, in teams, and on an extemporaneous schedule. Compared to Cornell, the workload is a LOT less.

For intensive courses, you have a final on Friday, the last day of that class. There is class from 8:30 until 10:00 usually and then the final starts 30 minutes later and usually ends around 1PM. Extensive courses have a midterm and a final with occasional multiple choice quizzes (MCQs). Grading is flat. It's all based on teamwork though.

Grades are sometimes based on tests, sometimes papers, but GROUP PROJECTS are huge! Almost everything is done in group projects.

I took 27 ECTS credits, which translated to Cornell credits, evens out to approximately 13.5 credits.

You cannot take your exams early. Unless you have two exams scheduled at the same time, you cannot change your exams, period.

Life Abroad

Language

I started taking French in sixth grade, and continued at Cornell, so I did not have many language problems. If you don't speak French, however, don't worry. Everyone at IESEG is really friendly and can speak English. All courses for students in their 4th and 5th years are in English - so pretty much everyone at the school is (at least!) bilingual in both French and English. You are also offered the opportunity to take French classes. There are four levels: débutante (beginner), semi-débutante (between beginner and intermediate), intermediate, and avancé (advanced) - so there's a French class for everyone. When it comes to daily life, the International Club will always help you if there are any administrative issues that arise with the French government (of which there will be quite a few).

I would recommend at least knowing the basics - hello, goodbye, thank you, can you speak English?, I'm sorry, where is the bathroom?, etc.

Banking

I did not open a local account because I had HSBC, which has a local presence in Lille. You need a French bank account, though, if you want to sign up for CAF, a subsidized program in which the French government helps students by giving them a little money to go towards rent/housing. Because I did not have a French bank account, I missed out on that, which I sorely regret because everyone got at least 70-100 euros a month - and that adds up! Many of my friends were with either BNP Paribas or Société Générale, two of the biggest banks in France. Société Générale actually has a partnership with IESEG, so you'll have a meeting at the beginning of the semester where you fill out a form to open a bank account with SocGen.

Housing

There are two university residences for IESEG, which are both handled by a French agency. You will need to email the people in charge and ask for housing. Most people lived outside of the residences in private apartments that they found online or through other French people. Work out your housing before you arrive in Lille! I knew so many people who were homeless even going into the fourth week of classes and were shelling out 70+ euros a night to stay in a hotel because all of the hostels were booked.
You definitely meet a lot more exchange students in a dorm and it’s more convenient. Most French students live in apartments at IESEG. Apartments offer more privacy and space to invite people over for dinners or drinks. I think your French would improve in a home stay. It all depends on what you’re looking for out of your experience.

I paid around 375-400 euros for housing. I had a roommate in a residence. I had friends who were paying anywhere from 300 to 600 euros for rent, depending on the location, size, etc. of their dorm/apartment. Utilities were included in my rent. If you do choose to go the apartment route, keep in mind that the French do not turn on the heat until mid-October and there are different prices for when you use utilities (i.e.: it’s cheaper/more expensive at night).

I usually cooked for myself in the kitchen of the dorm. I would invite people over for dinner, be invited over to other people’s places for dinner, or we would go to one of the many amazing restaurants in Lille. There is no meal plan, but there is a Restaurant Universitaire (RU) where you can buy tickets (10 tickets for 30 euros) and eat lunch or dinner. 1 ticket = 1 répas (meal).

**Transportation**

There is a metro in Lille with only two lines - the red and the yellow. They connect pretty much most of Lille. IESEG is a 10 minute walk at least, though, from the closest metro station. There is also a bus system. I never used the bus system, but there are a lot of buses. Tickets for both the metro and the buses cost around 1.50 euros. If you are going 3 or less metro stops away, though, you can buy a 75 cent ticket. Those reduced price tickets only work on the metro though. There is also a tram to connect Lille to its neighboring cities/suburbs.

Lille is also home to two major train stations - Lille Flandres and Lille-Europe. Lille Flandres is the station where most domestic trains depart from. Lille-Europe is where you would usually take a train to get to Charles de Gaulle airport, London, Brussels or any other country.

There are ticket booths in all metro stations. There are monthly and commuter passes as well, but you need to buy them at an SNCF office, located in either of the two train stations.

**Communication**

Skype has a deal where you can call, unlimited, any landline or mobile US/Canada phone for only $3/month. I did that to communicate with my parents when they were at work. Otherwise, I used Skype and Gmail to video chat with my friends/family.

I had an unlocked phone so I bought a SIM card and paid as I went. I had a couple of friends who signed up for a long-term contract with certain companies, but you need a French bank account to do that. The pay-as-you-go plan, if you don’t plan on sending too many text messages or making too many calls works out pretty well. There are three major companies: Orange, SFR and Bouygues. Make sure you get Orange if you are planning on going out of France, as the other two companies may not provide service outside of France. I know that SFR does NOT have any service outside of France. If you sign up for a contract, it is not too bad - you pay approximately 25-30 euros/month for unlimited texts and x amount of minutes. To cancel your contract, you just prove that you are leaving France - which is fine if you just show your student visa with your "leave" date!

**Social activities**

The students, even those who are not in the International Club, are all really friendly and always invite you to events. Most of the students have been on exchange or are planning on going on exchange, so not only do they love to meet new people and learn about different cultures, but also they understand how hard it is for exchange students to really meet native students.

The International Club arranged many activities and trips for exchange students. When I was there, we went around France, went to London, Amsterdam and Luxembourg.

For fun, students usually go out, they join clubs, they do sports - they’re very similar to American college students.

**Shopping**

I bought almost everything at Match, which is a supermarket, and Carrefour, which is the French Walmart. There is a significant shopping district in Lille - in the Grand Place (center of town) - if you want to shop. There are high-end retailers, like Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Longchamp, boutique jewelry stores, etc - as well as chain retailers, like H&M or Étam. There’s also a huge mall right next to Lille-Flandres. There is also a market at the Wazemmes marketplace every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Sunday is the big day for the Wazemmes market as most other places are closed that day. There, you can buy anything AND everything. If you go to Lille during the fall, there is a giant annual flea market - la Braderie de Lille. It is a three day event and it is known as the largest flea market in Europe. People from all over come to buy and sell goods.

Prices are almost the same as in the US - except they’re in euros and we operate in dollars. So, it’s a little pricier for US students. I always checked the exchange rates and drew cash out. My friends who had French bank accounts just used debit cards. The French don’t really use credit cards.

As I mentioned earlier, there is the Wazemmes market every Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. I definitely recommend them! There is usually so much good food to eat and cheap things to buy!
General store hours for groceries are from 8 or 9 AM - 8 or 9 PM. Retail stores usually open around 10 or 11AM and close around 6 or 7 PM.

H&M, Étam and Zara are all pretty popular. They're also found within a one block radius.

There are no bagels and no bacon. But there is a plethora of baguettes and croissants.

Health and Safety

I felt quite safe in Lille. Obviously, it's still a city so, if you're a girl, don't walk alone late at night. If you're a guy and you see a girl that you know walking home alone, stop her and walk with her. Be a gentleman. Chivalry is not dead - at least not in France!

Get all of your shots and medications dealt with in the states. When I was at IESEG, there was a girl who got bacterial meningitis at the school. All of the Americans were okay because we all got the meningitis vaccine. All of the French people were freaking out because they hadn't.

There is a university health center that covers all of the universities associated with the Lille Catholic University (La Catho for short).

Travel

Since I had already been to Eastern Europe on prior trips, I focused mainly in Western Europe. I went to Italy, Spain, Portugal, all around France, Luxembourg, Belgium (a lot!), Holland, the UK and Denmark.

During my semester, the International Club offered all exchange students the opportunities to go to the Loire Valley in France, where a lot of old aristocrats built their castles, Reims and the Champagne Valley in France, London, Amsterdam, and Luxembourg. My friends who stayed for another semester got to go to Normandy, Belgium, and Berlin as well.

I spent around $3000 on traveling, but I had saved up a lot of money. Try covoiturage.fr if you are traveling to an area that is within driving distance to Lille. It's a car-share site but be smart about who you get into a car with!

Overall exchange experience

Lille is in the north of France, and you can really see how French history shapes the cultural differences of France today. They say that the people from the North of France are friendlier than the people in the South, and it's definitely true.

I became a lot more aware of how different cultures viewed the same issue. There are definitely more than two sides to an issue and it was great to learn how a Mexican would approach something as opposed to how an American, an Indian, a Lithuanian, a Pole or a French person would.

I will definitely try to go abroad again, but from a work perspective. I would like to live in another country when I actually have responsibilities and limits. Study abroad was one of the best experiences of my life. I didn't have culture shock going into France, but coming back to the States, I definitely experienced reverse culture shock. I feel like I left a part of me in France and I'll always remember my time there, the people I met, the places I went to, etc., fondly. Who am I kidding, I wish I was back in France right now!